

Secondhand

Mana Angel

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Freya, Fratley, and the fixing of things which may or may not be broken to begin with. [Postgame, but spoilers only if you haven't played past Cleyra.]

1. Secondhand

Secondhand

*an unapologetically wordy FF9 fanfic by **Mana Angel***

When Fratley says ‘I love you’ it is not a statement, but a question; a futile attempt to revive things meant to lie dead. He airs the phrase out and feels around it in the same way one might air out an old piece of clothing found in an attic, feeling for where the moths have eaten through, wondering if it still fits.

Until realizing that it was never theirs to begin with.

...

There aren’t many who come down to the Dragon Knights’ old training yard, not the least because there are no more Burmecians who need to use it. The training centre had been burnt from the inside out in the course of Alexandria’s invasion, and the tongues of soot licking around its doors and windows are a testament still, to the magical flames

that even Burmecia's eternal rain could not hope to extinguish.

Setting the stones alight was a largely symbolical gesture on the Alexandrian army's part, Freya surmises, since the training center had been defunct long before a single Black Mage had ever been born. The stone-floored yard had been abandoned as a practice court just after Freya's novitiate, in favor of an earth-floored pen that served as her drill court in her years as a fully initiated dragoon. She can still remember its slick, unsteady surface, the soil churned to mud under the stamping feet of a thousand Dragon Knight hopefuls. In the morning, the evening's rain would have washed the ground clean once again, ready for another day of drills and exercises.

She remembers, too, the almost painfully adoring looks the novices had cast in her direction. It was doubtful that they were actually gazing at her; Freya presumes that what captured their attention and imagination was what she represented, the reward that would await them all after years of dedication. She remembers looking at the Dragon Knights with a similar kind of awe, in her own novice days, but to be the focus of such intense attention herself had unsettled her.

There are no trainees there now to make her feel self-conscious or suffocated, but after a few moments of standing at the field's edge, Freya chooses to leave its sullen cacophony of water meeting earth, seeking instead the more soul-soothing sound of raindrops striking stone.

The old training yard is paved with enormous flagstones of granite, some places gouged deep with the spear—and claw-marks of countless duels and drills fought upon it. Part of the reason the dragon knights had defected to the muddy fields behind the palace was the toll that practice was taking out of the stone — the cost of the yard's upkeep was enormous in terms of both gil and time, and instead of paying through the nose for a fifth refurbishing of the damaged floors, they opted for the option of a training field instead. In any case, they had reasoned, the novices would gain better experience fighting on shaky, slippery ground than the stone's teeth-jarringly hard surface. Freya recalls often wishing that the change had been implemented earlier, when she could have saved herself a few broken bones from being knocked down to the floor so often in her youth.

Now, however, the solid stone beneath her claws is reassurance rather than annoyance, something

solid to anchor her to the waking world. It's too easy, in Burmecia, to lose yourself in the rain and mist, to let your sense of self erode as the water pours over you. There are fighters who would give anything for this sense of detachment, swearing by the principles of elevated consciousness and distancing the mind from the body as a means of improving one's strength in battle.

Freya, though, prefers to remind herself that what she dreams with and what she fights with are irrevocably attached to one another.

The rain mutes the click of her claws as she crouches, shifting her feet and rising up onto her toes until she resembles nothing so much as a russet smear against the pavement, a bloodstain on the stone. Her crouch sends water dripping along her hat brim and down the back of her coat, but she keeps her spear extended before her like a question left to hang, balanced in thin air. Freya freezes, deliberately coiling energy in her muscles. At the angle she's tilted herself at, most humans would end up sprawling on their faces, but her tail, the only part of her still in motion, sways to counterbalance her weight.

It's half instinct and half careful control that lets her keep herself from tipping over now; her reflexes would probably do Zidane proud, even if they aren't quite on par with his. After all, he comes by this naturally, while Freya has to train regularly to be able to keep this level of ability up. There is, of course, a world of difference between Zidane's antics and a dragoon's predatory stance, but Freya finds that she envies him even that: her grace comes from the necessity of being the best at what she does, but his abilities have been honed by the pleasure he takes in what he does with them.

Zidane's brand of reflexes is for entertaining people— hers is for killing them.

Freya explodes from the floor in a whirlwind of water and fur, raindrops sluicing off the hem of her coat and spinning off into the darkness. The air and the rain tug at her clothes and her hair, dragging her down; she finds her hat rudely blown away by her self-generated wind, and the sudden shock of the downpour on her exposed muzzle is an oddly welcome sensation. But a dragoon's jump is no small thing, and for a few precious moments she is *flying*, fierce and beautiful and beholden to no one.

It is all too soon that gravity reasserts its inexorable pull on her, but she answers its call, bringing her javelin to bear on an invisible enemy below. She calls up the image of one of the dragons that still lurk in some of the ruins, imagines eyes narrowed in malevolence and scales as crimson as her coat— Freya may be a Dragon Knight, but she has never assumed that being named after the creatures obligates her to protect them. Instead, she feels the title places her on a standing equal to theirs, naming her worthy of holding her own against these beautiful beasts of claw and flame.

Her feet impact the stone lightly, her weapon tracing a path that sends her speartip clear through the dragon's sternum. Air parts easily before an assault intended for flesh, but before the speartip can follow the way of her claws and crack against the stonework, Freya's already twisting her weapon upwards to slide into the dragon's heart, using the recoil of her landing to propel a second jump.

A quick mince to the side sends her out of the way of a furious talon; the blast of flame that follows is more difficult to avoid, but she throws a leather-clad arm across her face to protect her eyes and dives directly into the dissipating heat, where the dragon will be least likely to expect her to come

from. Why a creature that would seem to be more at home in a desert favors this rainy vista, she does not know, but it is not her place to imagine what directions a monster's thoughts might take— save in the capacity of a fight. A dragon has more than one heart, though she's managed to hit the largest one; even with blood spurting from its chest in unsteady waves, it won't die for some time yet. She times her jumps to keep her feet clear of its wickedly lashing tail, waiting for the nearest opportunity to strike at the dragon's second heart, buried beneath the mithril-tough scales of its withers.

What she intended to be a light, mind-clearing exercise is rapidly degenerating into something else, a peculiarly violent form of catharsis only sweetened by every blow she lands. Her opponent is air, but she fights it as though her life depends on it, spinning like a dervish of fury and steel. It's not long before the dragoon's footwork begins to slide, before her strikes begin to fall wild instead of calculated. Were she truly fighting dragons, she would be dead in a heartbeat.

But it's no longer air she spars against, but things greater than any beasts, and far more difficult to see, ghosts of questions and fears she cannot hope to defeat with her spear alone. Even so, Freya tries, and

she wields her spear like a weapon and a shield in one, protecting herself even as she cuts out a path with it. Thrust and pivot, strike then strike again; lunge and stab and twist and *kill*—

Metal clashes on metal like a thunderclap in her ears, and the recoil that comes with it stings her hands and rattles her teeth.

Hissing in surprise and pain, Freya releases her spear, expecting to hear it clatter to the ground while she nurses her aching palms.

Instead, the patter of rain is the only sound in the courtyard, and with a sense of something like foreboding, Freya looks up, tracing a familiar trim figure in tan and grey. One clawed hand has caught her spear in mid-fall, heedless of how the blade digs into the leather of its glove; the other grasps both a glaive and the edge of a dripping, battered thing that she recognizes after a moment to be her hat. Her eyes travel further upwards, to gaze this interloper in the face.

Beneath his hat brim, Fratley's gaze is as inscrutable as the metal for which he is named.

...

He doesn't speak, at first; he tilts his muzzle at her imperceptibly, then indicates that she should follow him. Freya isn't certain what he wants of her, but she obeys. She notices that he makes no effort to return her weapon to her, but doesn't think much of it: her fingers are still numb, and she discreetly tries to rub some sensation back into them when Fratley isn't looking. She lets Fratley lead her to a building overlooking the city, between the palace and the residential area— private, but not remote. Dragoon legs make short work of the five-story distance between the ground and their destination, and in moments they're perched on the roof edge, like statues of Dragon Knights long gone.

It takes his voice, careful and questioning and just this side of patronizing, for her to decipher what his body has been conveying to her, to translate his wariness into a language she can understand. The care taken over his choice of words. The gentle tone.

He thinks she's *insane*.

She would have laughed, if she could, if she did not feel the crushing strength of a grip tighter than dragon talons squeezing her throat shut and turning her lungs into powder. Breathing abruptly becomes less like instinct and more like desperation, a futile

struggle to let her find her bearings once again. Perhaps she gasps aloud, but she cannot even hear herself think. Her mind is filled with a roar like the ocean, obliterating all sense and thought.

The sensation of drowning is overwhelming; for a moment, she chokes on water she cannot see.

He is still watching her when she regains some measure of equilibrium, hand half-extended towards her already— to shake her from her stupor, perhaps, and she does not know if it is caught mid-air simply because she opens her eyes, or because he is afraid to touch her. Fratley may be worried, after all, that madness is catching.

At the thought, Freya finds herself suddenly, abruptly tired.

If he thinks she is a madwoman, then far be it for her to persuade him otherwise. Freya Crescent would much rather be mad than heartsick, and she has been heartsick enough for a lifetime; here, with the stones of the only country she's ever loved beneath her, she would trade insanity for heartbreak in the time it takes for a drop of rain to shatter after another. But she finds this is impossible to do when confronted by the man of her dreams and hopes and waking nightmares, the man who is the

manifestation of so many of her hidden hopes and secret torments, and yet who *isn't*.

She thinks she really may be going mad, squirming under his stare, so she does the only thing she can think of to escape those eyes: muscles flex in familar tension as she spins and crouches, claws scrabbling along the roof edge even as a lifetime of practice automatically tells her body how to compensate, how to move.

Freya *jumps*.

It's a jump that would have, in older days, almost certainly gotten her a clip around the ear from her old drill sergeant for shoddy execution. Even Fratley himself, when he was her mentor, might have scolded her for her carelessness. Too much weight thrown forward, he'd tell her; the landing's going to be rough on your ankles. If you keep throwing yourself off buildings like that, you're going to end up with broken feet sooner than most civilians do.

That's alright, she thinks dizzily, since she's not aiming to land on her feet.

In dreamy fascination, she watches the sky swing up and away, replaced by the ground in complete defiance of gravity or even the most basic lessons of

physics. Fratley's face fills her vision for that split-second transition between heaven and earth, frozen in shock or horror, she can't tell.

But by then, she's beyond saving and beyond caring; the world's melted away and she's dancing alone in a downward spiral, falling... falling...

Stopped.

An iron vise latches around her ankle, abruptly arresting her fall. Caught by surprise, Freya squeals in a completely undignified and decidedly undragoon-like manner, shocked by the sharp pain and the surge of blood the sudden jerk sends to her head.

The gods roll some strange dice, and Freya finds herself startled and relieved to gradually realize that she's won. She is not about to die, not today, and she's vaguely amused when it occurs to her that she can hear Fratley shouting obscenities somewhere above her head. She finds herself being hauled back slowly— Fratley's had to lunge forward onto his belly to catch her, hooking his legs against the rooftop's low ledge to avoid falling off himself. Freya thinks his methods leave something to be desired; surely a Dragon Knight can think of a less

humiliating way to save someone from their own ill-advised stupidity.

And then it is worth it anyway, when she is pulled roughly into his arms and looks up into Fratley's eyes— his pupils blown wide open both by surprise at his vehemence and by some gutclenching fear perhaps even he himself cannot name. It is *worth it*, because she thinks she's come closer to finding an answer to a question she has never asked aloud.

She has not, as she once thought, been forgotten.

She just hasn't been giving him a chance to remember.

And for a bonus omake that was supposed to be more of the fic, but ended up not making it due to being from Fratley's POV — it's meant to connect to the above after they've both finished laughing themselves sick and/or Freya being amazingly schmoopy in a mildly hysterical 'omfg I was this close to killing myself!1' way'.

Fratley feels the fur on his nape becoming hot with shame, entirely too conscious of curious eyes and twitching ears surreptitiously swiveling in their

direction behind wooden shutters and barred doorways. If they were in Treno or Alexandria, the gossips' ability to hear might be confined by the rain, but this is Burmecia, and the housewives have had years and generations to become accustomed to winking out even the barest snatches of their neighbor's secrets, however torrential the downpour.

I worry vaguely that I make Freya too much of a wuss, or something, but I think being around Fratley tends to bring out the worst of her fears. I get the sense that a big part of why she set out to find him at all was the idea that if he came back, he'd make everything alright again, but instead, of course, what she found was worse. I doubt she ever copes with that easily, but maybe someday... XD

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